JOLIET JUNIOR COLLEGE

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

WILLIAM O. KNOWLTON

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STERLING: This is an interview with Mr. William Knowlton at Ellison Bay, Wisconsin, at his home, on October 4, 1974, at 7:30 in the evening.

STERLING: Perhaps the first thing that we should discuss is, where and when you were born.

KNOWLTON: February 17, 1896. The house was one mile north of the locks at Channahon, Illinois. On the east side of the canal, there was a bridge there called Knowlton's Bridge. The house was just north of the road in the angle made by the road and the canal -- north of the road and east of the canal bridge. The towpath of the canal made the western side of the yard. There were still a few mule-drawn canal boats left, and I remember them now. I also was personally acquainted with a man who had been a driver on the canal -- a muledriver. He told me how two boats passed. There was only one towpath on one side of the canal, so when two boats met (two mule-drawn canal boats) the upstream boat slacked her line, that is the team turned away from the water's edge and stopped. The barge went the other way, away from the towpath; it steered out that way so the towline laid across the towpath at a long angle until it reached the water where it sagged down in a large bight. The down-stream boat kept her course and speed; and when that team arrived alongside of the other line that lay along the towpath, the mules hopped over it. They didn't step over it, they jumped over it. The reason they jumped over it, was because they knew that if the other team started up too soon

they'd be caught by the line and thrown into the canal, which did happen once. The barge ran over the sunken bight. As soon as the barge was over the bight, then the upstream team started up again. The reason that was done that way was because the upstream boat, although she might not be moving over the bottom, was still moving through the water, which gave her steerageway. They had it timed out pretty fine. They never stopped at all (that is neither boat stopped, they were always moving) -- that's one point where you must be careful to get that right. It was the upstream boat that slacked her line, and not the downstream boat. Neither boat let go of her towline; it was kept fast. The towline was made fast to a cavil-cleat, a little ways aft of the stem, about fifteen feet I would imagine. That was so the barge would not turn in toward the bank. That gave the barge a tendency to sheer out away from the towpath. The steersman corrected that with a tiller; they were steered with a tiller. The driver rode the last mule, the fifth mule, and guided his team by means of a jerkline -- a single rein that led to the left hand bit ring of the lead mule. The lead mule was always a jenny, that is a female. Never a jack; all the other four were jacks. To turn the team to the left, the driver gave a steady pull; that would turn the lead mule left. To turn to the right, he gave several sharp jerks -- she was trained to turn the other way. He carried a long, black snakewhip, but I never saw a driver hit the mule, he just cracked it. That was the way they did that.

STERLING: Was there any reason for having the jenny leading?

KNOWLTON: Yes, she could be trained to turn to the right easier than the jack -- they're smarter. I drove a team of mules in Philadelphia, so I know something about mules. It's entirely different from horses. You can be a good horse-driver, a good teamster, but when you start driving mules, it's about like learning to row a boat and paddling a canoe. If you've done both of those, you'll know there is quite a difference.

STERLING: There were some locks near where you lived, right?

KNOWLTON: There were two locks. The locks were about one mile south of the bridge. The Du Page River crosses the canal at Channahon. The canal does not go over it in an aqueduct; there is no aqueduct there. The Du Page River was just dammed up there with slack water, and the boats went across from one lock to the other. There were two locks in Channahon. The upper lock had a lift of seventeen feet; the lower lock's lift depended on the stage of the river, because it could go up and down. To go across from one lock to the other there was, what we called, the Boom Bridge. B-O-O-M, Boom. There was a boom, a floating sort of a raft-like arrangement, that was so the canal boats would not be sent down the current of the river. Sometimes the wind, the west wind, blew strongly through there. That Boom Bridge, that I just barely remember, it fell down when I was still quite young; but I remember it had high trestlework on the downstream side, but on the other side, the timbers were low. That was so the towlines could go

across there. On those lock walls (I think it's a park now or something) on those lock walls, on the eastern side of lock, if you look along that, you'll see deep grooves worn. That was worn by the towlines, as they towed the boats into the locks.

STERLING: How did the mules get across? There was a high bridge that went up?

KNOWLTON: Yes, they went on this Boom Bridge.

STERLING: They walked on the Boom Bridge?

KNOWLTON: On the bridge, yes. The boom floated in the water down below.

STERLING: And there was a bridge above?

KNOWLTON: Yes. The bridge was here, the boom was right down here. The mules went across here, that's why this one timber was low; and they walked across there. That's the way that was done; that was kind of a bottleneck because those two locks were in plain sight of each other. I would judge them to be about two hundred yards apart, and maybe a little more than that. So when a boat locked down, the canal was very busy in those days, I knew the locktender, Mr. Horton -- he could remember when it was built. They couldn't run the lock empty because on the count of water -- they didn't have a very good water supply. They got their water from the local rivers by means of dams, and so on. So they had to always be careful

of the water. The procedure was -- say a boat is bound downstream -- she locked through the upper locks coming down, then she went and locked through the lower lock. As far as I know, the boats did not pass each other between those locks. She locked through the lower lock. Now, both locks were empty. Now the next boat up, she came upstream and she locked up. They never ran the locks empty. There was a locktender on duty at each lock, but the crews of the boats were anxious to get through. They would always help lock the boats through. The gates, as I said, were wooden. There was a big, heavy beam stuck in shore from each gate -- you pushed on that real hard to open the gates. There were two valves on each gate, making four valves on the upstream end of the lock, and four below. Those valves were worked with iron levers, and you would pull the lever up like this and then pull the other up. One peculiar thing about them -- when the lock was empty, when the boat was down below, you would think that if you opened the valve on the upper gates it would wash the boat right out of the lock. It was not so -- it was the other way around. It drew her in against the upper gates with a death grip, and you couldn't get her loose. You had to keep those valves closed. I have helped pull a barge out of the locks -- we used to use a four-part block and tackle, and it took three or four men all we could do to get her started away from those gates. Once you had her away, say ten or twelve feet, then she'd come; then you could open the valve and give her what we called the "Dutch Kick," and she'd go right out. Now, to keep the boats from

fouling as they were locking up or down, there were heavy planks on the downstream side of the upper gates -- those were the rubstrakes, (they were two inches thick) and without those rubstrakes we couldn't have handled the boat, because the suction would have pulled her in there, and she would have caught on the timbers. There was one thing they had to watch for coming downstream, coming into the lock. If they were coming in too fast, they might wreck the lock; and that did happen once, Mr. Horton told me. A steamboat (they used steamboats too, as well as mule-drawn boats) had a one-cylinder steam engine, only one cylinder -- if it got caught on dead center, the engine would stop. This cylinder was in a horizontal position fore and aft. I've been down in the engine room; I know what the engine looked like. It ran a transverse crankshaft. On that shaft, there were two bevel gears. The steamers had twin screws, though they only had one cylinder. One engine worked both screws with these bevel gears. The reason they had twin screws was on account of the shallow draft. One propellor wouldn't have been big enough, so they had to use two. In this case, Mr. Horton told me this steamer was coming into the lock, and the pilot didn't signal his engineer soon enough, and when he finally did give the signal, the engine got stuck on dead center and she went down into the lower gates and smashed everything up. That accident also had happened on the Sault Canadian Canal. You see there is a canal on the Canadian side of the Sault, only this time the steamer was coming upstream. It was supposed to come in

real slow, and the captain of this Canadian ship rang his engineer to stop, and the engineer didn't pay any attention to him. And he rang astern, and he still kept coming. With all the frantic bells, screaching down the tube, and so on -- he went right through those upper gates. It washed him back out; a ship that was waiting to come down was washed through too. It was awful. So you had to be careful. That is the reason why, on the Panama Canal, they never allow a ship to go through under her own steam. They have electric locomotives on each side. A big ship would take six cables, and those electrical locomotives, "mules," they called them, they ran on cogwheel tracks to give them a grip, so they wouldn't slip. They would take the ships through that way. There is also a guard of soldiers on board the ship, and they're down in the engine room, too. The engineers' crew of the ship, they are not allowed in there; they have to keep them out of there. There are also guard gates on the Panama Canal. Those auxilliary gates are closed when the ship is coming up until the "mules" have got ahold of her, so if she does come on in, she'll hit those guard gates first. And there are also chains, heavy chains, that can be winched up. They lie on the bottom, ordinarily, but they can be winched up to catch the boat if she's coming in too fast. That's in case an enemy ship should try to wreck the gates. On the Illinois and Michigan Canal, at the time they started to dig, they decided to dig down deep enough so they would get water by gravity from Lake Michigan, which the drainage canal now does. They concluded that it would be

too much to dig. At the time, they didn't have the equipment they've got now. The Illinois and Michigan Canal was dug with animal and manpower, almost exclusively. The general system, they drove wagons down into the excavation and picked and shoveled the gravel; but they also used what they called a handbarrow. My Uncle Frank Turner told me about it. They had handbarrows, just a big box with handles at each end so two men could pick it up. And they would shovel gravel and dirt into that box and carry it up out of the excavation in places where they couldn't use the teams. That was the way the canal was dug. It was dug by contractors; quite a few would take a section of so much length.

STERLING: With all that rock and stone it was hard going.

KNOWLTON: The stones are not solid rock in most cases, although in some places the canal touches bedrock. All they could do then was use black powder; they had no dynamite in those days. To get water, they finally decided on what they called the shallow cut. The upper level of the canal, what they called the summit level,was above the level of Lake Michigan. To get water into that level, they pumped it with steam pumps. (The steam pumps, I think, were located at Bridgeport.) They actually pumped water into that canal to float the barges, so you see they had to be very economical in the use of water. The Des Plaines River was used as a feeder -- that was at Joliet. (The canal crossed the Des Plaines River at Joliet). That was one feeder. Now, about two miles north of our house (upstream

from our house) the Du Page River had a dam and a feeder to turn water into that level. And at Channahon, where the Du Page River crossed, they could get water again from the Du Page. Below Channahon about four miles, at Dresden Heights, (where the big nuclear power plant is now located) there was still another feeder there that came from the Kankakee River, and that feeder came from Wilmington and crossed the Des Plaines River on a large aqueduct. The piers of the aqueduct were stone, but the aqueduct itself was made out of wood. The canal went right across this long aqueduct. The canal boats ran to Wilmington -- that was a branch of the canal. I've seen it at Wilmington. There was another aqueduct a little south of that that carried the canal over the Aux Sable River and another at Marseilles. Beyond than that, I don't know.

STERLING: These aqueducts carried the canal over the rivers?

KNOWLTON: Carried the canal over the river, that's right. They were like big wooden bridges only with a big trough in them, and there was room for only one boat. The boats could not pass in the aqueducts; the downstream boat had the right of way.

STERLING: How were these aqueducts constructed?

KNOWLTON: Masonry piers come up like this, a U-shape, you see. The aqueduct over the Aux Sable River is still there. You should be able to see it because the canal furnishes water for the paper mill at Morris, Illinois. There's one other anecdote that my Uncle Frank told me which you better check up on this --

you've heard of Wild Bill Hickok, the gunman? He was a driver on the canal, so my Uncle Frank told me. There was a canal boat owner, he told me the man's name, but I've forgotten it. He had a canal boat, and he hired the men that were alcoholics. He bought the old worn out mules and literally worked them to death. These stumblebums, I guess you could call them, they applied the whip unmercifully. Wild Bill, his name was James Hickok at the time, he didn't like that; it wasn't a very popular thing to abuse a horse or a mule. He warned this man several times if he didn't stop abusing those mules, the next opportunity he got he'd throw him and the team into the canal. My uncle showed me the place where this happened -- as a boy he lived in this house that I told you about. I was down there visiting, and he told me about this. We walked on the canal, and that place I judged to be about 150 yards south of the bridge. That bridge is on what we call the Slide Road coming out from Morris, heading east. The bridge is still there. It's modern now, but the house is gone. My Uncle Frank was living there with his uncle at the time, and Bill (James at the time) Hickok was bound up driving his team; see he was driving the last mule, he was the driver. When he heard the whip going upstream, he could hear the driver swearing at the mules, so of course he had to pull over and stop and wait for the other team to come. Just as the other team was in the right position he cracked his whip and hollered at the mules (they were all young mules) and they jumped into the collars. The line came taut and threw the whole team into the canal. They were so weak anyhow they couldn't have gotten out;they were tangled in the harness. He

drowned the driver too. That's what my Uncle Frank told me -- I don't think he'd lie. So Bill got off of his mule right away and ran up to the house about 20 yards away (this was at night);and he said to Frank's uncle "Take my team and drive it into Bridgeport,"(that was the terminus of the canal)"and give me the best horse you've got. I'm off for the west and I've just drowned so-and-so's team and driver." So they gave him the best horse they had,an old cap-and-ball revolver, one of these kind -- muzzle loader, you know; they gave him that. That was the first pistol he owned, I guess. So, of course, they had to get a posse out and chase him, you see. First they searched all aroung north, east, and south where they were sure he hadn't gone, and about the time daybreak came they managed to get to the west side of town. No one had seen him, and it was pretty cold and they stopped at a bar there to get a few drinks, and that's where the chase ended. (Laughter) The queer part of it was -- they had telegraph at the time, that was after the Civil War, but no one thought to telegraph, because nothing is ever done about it. Then this skinflint barge owner, he was given to understand by the grapevine, I guess, that it would be lots healthier for him to leave the country too. And that was the end of that.

STERLING: You said you knew one captain -- do you recall the name?

KNOWLTON: One driver. His name was James Redmond. R-E-D-M-O-N-D, Redmond.

STERLING: I would imagine these crews and the people working the barges were rather a rough, rowdy lot. Weren't they?

KNOWLTON: Originally they were at first, but they tamed down considerable. There was a saloon at the upper lock and a saloon at the lower lock; and one of the old residents there, Mr. Whitmore, said that from his house, he could look over there any time of the day and see two or three fights going on. See, they had to wait to get through the locks; that was the big bottleneck.

STERLING: So Mr. Horton, the locktender, actually had a concession on the side?

KNOWLTON: No.

STERLING: Oh, there was a separate building.

KNOWLTON: No, there was a separate building. The locktenders were employed by the state; they wouldn't be allowed doing that. There were two locktenders, one for the upper lock, and one for the lower lock. That's the way that was.

STERLING: Did your parents ever object to you, as a child, hanging around those rough characters?

KNOWLTON: Well, by the time I came along, they weren't rough anymore. The canal was on it's last legs then. I was born in 1896. There were only a few boats left, and neither saloons were going then. The buildings were even gone, so there weren't any -- no, I never saw any drunken brawls. That was the way

that was.

STERLING: How would you describe Channahon? What was Channahon like when you were a boy?

KNOWLTON: When I was a boy. Well, it was kind of a"sleepy hollow"affair. When the railroad superceded the canal business, the town died. Originally there was a gristmill there. I can barely remember it, but it was powered by water power. There wasn't much left there; see the canal boats weren't running anymore, and the farmers didn't come in with their grain. They used to load those boats at the bridges when there wasn't any elevator. They would take up a plank and position the boat under the bridge and dump the grain down into the boat. The boats were 100 feet long -- the canal boat. They had a usual length of 100 feet long. The locks were 110. You couldn't use all of that because you had to have room for the gates to swing. The locks were 18 feet wide, and the boats were 16 feet wide, and they drew about four feet loaded. There was 4'6" inches of water over the miter sills when the lock was empty. That was the controlling draft. They were wooden, of course; and they leaked more or less, and they had to keep the pump dry so the grain wouldn't get wet. A barge held 6000 bushels, a steamer held 4000. The machinery of the steamer, the boiler and engine, were all right aft. And the smoke stacks had to be hinged to let them down to go under the bridges. We used to listen and we could tell pretty close when we heard one coming. They exhausted their air like a locomotive with only one cylinder. "Chow-Chow-Chow-Chow",just about like that.

We'd run up on the bridge;and when they would let the smoke stack down and that black smoke would come up, we'd run to get into that smoke. My mother didn't appreciate that. (Laughter) My brother, who was the oldest one in the family, he was a big tall fellow, and he would hang on the bridge and drop down on it going under and ride on down to the lock. One of them stopped to repair a tiller line once, so I rode on down to the lock. So I rode on a steam-powered canal boat. It was common when we were swimming to swim out and grab the towline. The steamer pushed one barge in front of her; it was hooked on to a big stay-rod, a turnbuckle sort of bolt. Besides that, she'd tow one, two, and rarely three barges behind her, generally on long towlines. We were swimming a good deal of the time, and in the summertime we would swim out and grab that towline as it was going along in the water. It was going pretty fast--(Laughter)

STERLING: Now how would they lock something like that through? Each barge separately?

KNOWLTON: Each barge had to lock separately. When they came with a fleet like that, of course, the pilot ran his head barge into the lock; he had to steer very close to do it. Then they uncoupled the barge from the steamer. If she was locking down, then they had to put the block and tackle on the barge and pull it clear of the lock. Next, the steamer locked through, coupled up to the barge again; and then the others came along behind. It took them a long time. To get a fleet, say a steamer and two barges (well three barges),to get those through both locks

it would just about kill an afternoon. It took a long time to get through those two locks.

STERLING: Now if there were no boats waiting down to lock up, this problem of economizing the water, did they go ahead and lock the barges down? It seems to me that this would have presented a problem.

KNOWLTON: It did present a problem. When my time came along, there was no need of economizing our water anymore, because the drainage canal was put through about the turn of the century; and they had plenty of water then. The drainage canal cut right through the divide, you see; and the current of the Chicago River was reversed and flowed back the other way. So then the feeders were abandoned. The old aqueduct over the Des Plaines River, I mean from Wilmington from the Kankakee River, that I can just barely remember, fell down in my own time. It was a wooden aqueduct; and unless they were kept up,they would fall down. Well, the wooden gates would fall down too. I think there was only one pair of gates left in Channahon now, just to show what they were like.

STERLING: You said before that you swam in it. When did the water start going bad?

KNOWLTON: I don't know.

STERLING: You did swim and fish in it though?

KNOWLTON: Well, there weren't so many fish,some carp, and once

in a while some bullhead, but there weren't so many fish. The water was really worse before the drainage was turned in than it was afterwards because it was so stagnant then, there wasn't much water. But I don't remember that, that was before my time. By the time I was big enough to take any notice of anything like that, they had the water from Lake Michigan. When the drainage was first put through there, they were not limited as they are now. They could take as much water out of Lake Michigan as they wanted to. They kept her boiling through there. Oh yes, plenty, many times more than they're using now. They just drew so much water through that it was better. But now I think they are limited to 3,000 cubic feet per second, or something like that.

STERLING: Do you recall the process of putting in the sanitary and ship canal?

KNOWLTON: No, that was when I would have been only two years old. But they had been working on it for quite a while. They cut right through the divide. I think that there is 20 feet of water there. There is a dam in Lockport; that's where the lock is there, I think.

STERLING: When did they dredge that out around Joliet?

KNOWLTON: For the drainage canal?

STERLING: Yes.

KNOWLTON: The drainage canal ends at Lockport above Joliet.

And they never dredged that out there. They've got the waterway through there now; you must know about that. It comes right through. But, of course, that follows the channel of the Des Plaines River.

STERLING: Did they dredge that?

KNOWLTON: They used dams and locks. There's a dam at Dresden; there's another at Brandon's Bridge -- there is a dam out there that backs the water up to the foot of the Lockport lock. The dam there at Lockport they call the Bear Trap Dam, probably heard of that.

STERLING: There was a dam at one time at Jackson Street.

KNOWLTON: The Jackson Street Dam was across the Des Plaines River that was part of the Illinois and Michigan Canal. That dam at Lockport has done away with it since, I understand. But, they still turn water down into the Old Illinois and Michigan Canal, as far as I know.

STERLING: Yes. It's not much, but some.

KNOWLTON: No, it is pretty well plugged up with mud. They take some of the Du Page River, at Channahon, and turn it down into what we call the lower level. This is used for the paper mill at Morris. Beyond, that I think she is dry most of the way.

STERLING: What about winter time? Did the activity on the canal stop at a given date, or did it go by the weather?

KNOWLTON: No, it stopped at a given date. Beyond that, they didn't allow boats to go through. I don't remember just when the date was, but I think it was sometime in November. They had a problem in the winter time with the ice shoving on the banks of the canal. They were always either drawing water down, or else letting it in to raise the level up and down. That kept the ice broken up, so it wouldn't expand and push on the controlling works and so on. There were spillways along it to control the level. There was one time, Mr. Horton told me, when he, his wife, and the locktender of the lower lock were all sleeping. (They lived in one house at that time.) This locktender of the lower lock hadn't gone to bed yet. He stepped outside to take a last look around, and he stepped into water, and it was running over the sides of the lock. There was a bank there that had grass on it that hadn't been cut yet. Of course, he raised the alarm right away, and they got out of there. They grabbed Mrs. Horton, one on each side of her, and got her over the bridge. They were on the wrong side of the lock, you see, and took her up the towpath. Charlie Hicks, who was the locktender of the lower lock, ran up the offside of the canal, not the towpath, the other side where the spillway was, and going through the water, (he was wading through the water) he opened the gates of the spillway; it was kind of a slow job. He got those wide open and then came back and got on the other side. In the meantime, Mr. Horton, the locktender, was telephoning to Joliet to shut her off up there and open all the rest of their spillways. It saved her;

otherwise, she might have gone. And then, I remember very well when I was about 8 or 9 years old, something like that, we had the bridge war of Channahon. These bridges were made out of wood. They had been originally painted white, but of course they didn't have any money to keep anything up so they got rotten and dangerous. So, one morning, the bridge was discovered to be on fire; you know how they were bent like this right here in the center of the north bent was fire. It was what they called dry rot, you could poke a hole in there anyplace and find fire. So the bridge went down, and there was no way to get across. The next thing the canal bank was cut. First it was cut below the bridge, where there were all trees there that couldn't wash out. The next cut they made was up in our pasture ; then she went. So then they hired guards, outside guards, to patrol the banks ; but finally they went to work and got iron bridges across.

STERLING: How did the bridge start on fire?

KNOWLTON: I don't know. It might of been spontaneous combustion. (Laughter) Farmers were up in arms, of course, because they couldn't get across with their teams. And, of course, was a dangerous thing. They had put barracades across the road so no one could go across it, but that didn't solve the problem ; you still couldn't get across. It was a windfall for me because we had rafts of the old timbers, and I had a job as a ferryman. I wasn't allowed to charge any fare of course, because I didn't have a license of anything; but on the

other hand, well -- I wasn't prohibited from accepting tips. (Laughter) And so, the news got out around the boys that I was making big money, sometimes as much as 50 cents a day. I had a lot of applications for jobs as deck hands, so I took them all in. But we didn't stick very close to a schedule; you couldn't because when you had 20 or 50 cents you went down the towpath to the store and spent it on candy. (Laughter)

STERLING: How many stores were there in Channahon?

KNOWLTON: There were two and sometimes three -- but generally just two.

STERLING: Who owned those stores?

KNOWLTON: Mr. Randall, who was an old Civil War veteran, owned one store; and Mr. Hulbert owned the other store. Mr. Hulbert was the postmaster.

STERLING: Were they the same kind of stores, the general stores?

KNOWLTON: Yes, general stores. They carried pretty nearly everything. They even had the old cracker barrels; I remember them well. Yes, indeed. Old coffee grinders with double flywheels on them, and so on. They ran for about half an hour.

STERLING: Did you often go to Joliet with your father?

KNOWLTON: Not so often. We lived twelve miles from Joliet. Yes, it would be about twelve miles from our house to the court house. He went on the train. We had no automobiles in those

days. It was three miles to the nearest railroad station, so we would go over there on a horse. I started driving when I was nine years old, and that wasn't considered anything out of ordinary.

STERLING: And he did that daily? Went to work and came home?

KNOWLTON: He went to work and came home daily in the summertime, but not in the winter. Then he only came home on the weekends. He was one of the first commuters. Why it was he located there (three miles from the railroad) I don't know. It wasn't very pleasant on cold winter mornings.

STERLING: I would imagine not.

KNOWLTON: I'd get up early in the morning and go out. My job was to feed the horse, and then curry her and brush her off. Then I'd put the harness on -- all but the bridle. That was brought in the house and hung behind the stove so by the time we came back in,it would take the frost out of the bit. Otherwise it would have a sore mouth. You could see the frost coming out of the bit; otherwise all we had was a buggy. We put hot soapstones in there; but by the time we got to the station, it got pretty cold. It was slow going. They wouldn't have done it now, but they did in those days though. I remember one awfully cold morning; it was so cold when I got there that I stood close to the stove, and it was red hot in the station. Someone noticed that my overcoat was smoking, and I still hadn't felt anything. (Laughter)

STERLING: That's cold!

KNOWLTON: Then coming back, home when I'd be by myself, then there wouldn't be any problem. The wind was generally with you then, and I would get out of the buggy and trot along behind hanging on to the back. It was a common thing in those days for someone to drive their horse or team into Minooka (that was a town) and just turn them loose, and they would go home by themselves. I've done that many times. You could tell when the team was coming along without a driver because they would stay right in the middle of the road; they wouldn't get out for you. So you would turn off one way or another. There was no hard and fast rules about turning to the right -- we generally did, but not always. You see, there was only one turnpike gravel road, one lane where you could haul a big load without too much work on the team. So the rule was that the loaded team had the right of way. There would be dirt tracks on one side or the other -- or sometimes both sides. Now if you met a loaded team, or if you met one of these driverless rigs, you got out of the road right away. They would turn a little for you, but never far enough. And when they got home and turned into the gate, they never turned far enough; they always turned a little bit short and caught the gate, but that was common.

STERLING: I would imagine plank roads were no longer in use when you were a boy.

KNOWLTON: I've never seen the plank road. I've seen one block

of wooden pavement in Philadelphia, but those were 4 X 4's treated with tar and set in -- down they worked alright. A little slippery when they were wet, but they were quiet. The horses hoofs made quite a clop on them -- did you ever hear them? On the asphault?

STERLING: Yes.

KNOWLTON: Well imagine hundreds of them. The worst kind of pavement was what we called the Belgium Blocks. They were stones about like this (rectangular stones); they were a little convex, and you can imagine what the iron tires did on those. We used to drive on the streetcar tracks as much as possible. The wide ones would just fit on the streetcar tracks. That's where we get our railroad gauge here at 4'8½", because the wagons were that width. The reason the wagons were that width was because the team travelled inside of the tracks to keep out of the ruts. And that was the best width to have the wheels outside of the team. That's the standard gauge all over the world.

STERLING: Your dad was involved in politics?

KNOWLTON: He was assistant county clerk.

STERLING: Did he have to run for office?

KNOWLTON: No, he was appointed. At that time the government (the county government) -- the county clerk knew practically nothing about the office work. His job was to win elections.

The assistant county clerk had to be the brains. My father knew the law; I have never seen him refer to a law book. He could quote any law. I've been in the office quite a few times when people would come in there; and they would ask him a question, and he would answer them right away. In casting up accounts of any kind (to add figures) he did not add one column at a time like we do; but two columns at a time. Like 45 + 57 + 63, and he would write the answer right down there. He never checked it; he was always right.

STERLING: Then did your family live from election to election? His job really depended on which party was elected then, didn't it?

KNOWLTON: Theoretically it did, although he was Republican. You see, at that time, Will County was Republican; but Joliet was Democratic. Joliet had a city government, see; it was not connected with the county you might say. The Democrats always assured my father that if they ever won an election, he would still keep his job, because he had everything so well in hand. He knew the in and outs. It was really wonderful. The bar association kept trying to get him to take out lawyer's license. The examination would be a mere formality -- well, of course, it would have been; but he wouldn't take it. On account of the ethics of profession, if you take a case, your first duty is to your client whether he is in the right or wrong. My father wouldn't take a case if the man was in the wrong, so he wouldn't do it. But he would give out free legal advice, and the other lawyers didn't like that very much.

(Laughter) Believe me, it was great times. We had quite a herd of cattle. Like most of those farms, the land wasn't very good -- it was stoney. Why they did this, I don't know, but every one of them was over-stocked. They always had more cattle and horses than they had pasture for, so it was up to the kids to herd them. We had a fine pasture on that towpath of the canal. By rights, you weren't allowed on it at all. You couldn't drive a horse on it, or anything of that kind. It was reserved for the teams for towing the boats. There were so few of them that every one drove it; and of course, we pastured cattle on it. Canal people didn't make any objection to that, because they didn't have any money to keep the brush down, and the cows would do that. It's all timber now. Have you seen it?

STERLING: Yes, there are still some places where you can still see the path.

KNOWLTON: You can see the towpath, but mostly it's grown up to timber. Our grazing ground was just north of the house -- have you ever been in Channahon?

STERLING: Yes, but I don't know where your house would have been located.

KNOWLTON: You don't know where the house would have been located? Have you ever been in Minooka?

STERLING: Yes, but I'm not familiar with it.

KNOWLTON; Well, if you took the road from Minooka to Channahon, you would come to a bridge over the canal, and just after you crossed that bridge, there our house would be on your left. There's another house there now, a more modern house. You see, Channahon has grown a lot since the automobile took over. I think there is four or five thousand people, something like that. We had a place we called the Wide Water. That's just north of our house (quarter of a mile). Originally it was kind of a creek that went through there. Just by running a dike across that creek and damming it up they made this lake that I judge to be about two miles long and oh, perhaps, a good quarter of a mile wide. That Wide Water there was quite a long, wide stretch; there between the canal and the road that was apparently a "No Man's Land" that no one used, and everybody herded their cows on that. So we herded our cattle there. We had a big bull, a big, red bull, he was a monster! To show you the way people worked then and now-a-day's -- You know today, they keep bulls in strong, iron-welded corrals; and they have usually got him with a staff and watch out for him -- good reason to, you can't trust them. But they'd let us go out with that bull. But the cattle knew what to do. We had two big dogs, Saint Bernards; so we would go out there and some kids would take the north end, and some would take the south end. We would put all the cows together (it wouldn't hurt them) so when they would come up this way, we would turn them back (the dogs would do that). But this old bull, he would get enough grass inside him before the cows did. They were milking, and it took more. He would come up there where we would be at the

north end and there was thicket that grew there in the shade. He would come up there and get in that shade to get out of the sun, and down he'd go -- lie down. One kid was always detailed to brush flies off of him. We would break a branch off with leaves on it, you know, and brush like that. He would stick his nose up there and (make a sound like the bull) go like that. (Laughter) He liked that, see; of course he wouldn't hurt us. So then when we came back there was a cottonwood tree across on the other side in their pasture; that's what they stood under. It was shallow there, and they would stand in the water so the flies couldn't get at their legs. The bull always goes last in any cow herd. He doesn't lead. No, it's always the cows that lead, not the bull. The cattle determine who's going to be their leader by putting their heads together and pushing. The one who can out push all the others, she's the leader. Then the next one, the next one, and the next one. Each one has its place in all that long string, and they know; they won't allow any other to take their place; but the bull always brings up the rear. So we would trot along behind him, and when the cattle got opposite this tree (they would go around to the bridge, you know). We would run up along side of that bull on the bankside, and push on his head and slap his face with our hands. Of course it was like a mosquito, it didn't bother him any. He would shut his eyes like that. He would protest a little; but he wouldn't make any moves, and then we would make him jump in and swim across. We wanted to see him swim. (Laughter) We got into trouble that way too.

The old boy got it into his head that he would like to take a little pass through around the country and see the scenery one warm afternoon. He plunged in and swam back the other way, and went down to the village. They had a jail there, just a little frame building; and around that jail, on one side of it, there was a pine-board fence. That was a pound for stray cattle, you see. The gate was open. It was kind of warm, and he went in there and laid down in the shade of the jail. And as luck would have it, the pound master, Mr. Lawler, was driving along and he saw him in there. He just hopped out of his wagon, and went over and shut the gate. When he got home he called up and my father happened to be at home. He said he had our bull down there. I think it cost a dollar to get him out. My father said, "Alright, that's the law!" This bull was fed a ration of grain with some Linseed oil meal, and he was very fond of that. He got that in the evening. In the meantime, a lot of the native skunk trappers around the village (that was the principle work in Channahon at that time.) (Laughter) They gathered around and they were perched on this fence, and the old boy figured it was time for supper, so he got up. He didn't bother with the gate, he just simply walked through the fence. He didn't put his head through the fence, he just walked through it. (Laughter) Oh, I saw him go through the side of the cow barn once. Oh, they're strong! They all got out of there right away! Then he came back and walked up opposite the tree, plunged in, swam across, and went over and got in the stall, and my grandfather fed him. The next thing, here came Mr. Lawler.

Well, by that time the bill had mounted. It was a dollar fee plus the repairs for the fence that was broken down. My father quoted the law to him, "The law states that the animal should be kept in confinement." Mr. Lawler said, "How the blankety-blank-blank--could you confine such a thing as that!" (Laughter) "Well", he said, "that's the law!";and he didn't pay anything. (Laughter) Of course,it was all strictly legal; we shouldn't have. There was once, only once, we got into trouble herding cattle. We were bringing them home; as quick as they had had enough, they'd start home themselves (generally about 11 o'clock). We were coming down on the towpath -- the herd took up the whole towpath -- and here came a mule-drawn canal boat. Now mules always look out for themselves. They watch out for number one. And when they saw that herd of cattle coming, they turned and ran. The driver couldn't do anything. It pulled the barge; of course, that came ashore right away, and there it was. When they got to the end of the towline, of course, they stopped and the herd went on. Then they had to pull the boat out, (Laughter) but no harm done.

STERLING: You mentioned Mr. Horton; what kind of a person was he?

KNOWLTON: He was an old Civil War veteran. He had been through the whole mill in the Civil War. A combat veteran. He was a small man, about my size. He was born in, I think, New Jersey. He had worked on boats himself as a young man, steering and so on.

STERLING: How did they signal at night? Did they lock boats through at night?

KNOWLTON: Oh yes, they worked at night.

STERLING: How did the boats signal?

KNOWLTON: For the locks? The boat coming down, she blew one blast on the whistle.

STERLING: That's steam; what about the others?

KNOWLTON: They had a horn they could blow. They blew one short blast for a bridge ; then the engineer came up and let the smokestack down. There would be big counterweights to counter the weight of the smoke stack, so it wouldn't be so hard to let the smokestack down They got into trouble with a steamboat once. They took her up to Chicago, and for some reason or another they had to take her down the Chicago water front and Lake Michigan. Of course, these smoke stacks didn't have any wire stays on them because they had to be put up and down. You didn't need them in the canals, because they're flat and calm. When they ran out in the Chicago River, she started rolling ; and they had to turn around and come right back in or she would have rolled the stack right out of her. I've been to sea myself. I've been on the ocean. I know something about ships. You have to have wire stays. Canal boats were not good sea boats.

STERLING: As a young man in Channahon, what was your first

job? Did you work in Channahon?

KNOWLTON: I worked on the farm. That was the only thing there was at that time, unless you were going to trap skunks. (Laughter)

STERLING: You keep saying "trapping skunks."

KNOWLTON: I never trapped but one.

STERLING: What did they do with them?

KNOWLTON: Sold the skins! Oh yes! Oh, you bet! Skunk fur would sell in those days. By the time the furrier got through, it wasn't skunk anymore, it was Japanese water mink. (Laughter) We had a school teacher that boarded with us, and she wanted a set of furs. They only got $40, $50 a month, something like that, not much. But she saved up until she had enough money to buy this set of furs. I was only about seven or eight years old, something like that. Here she came with this set of fine black furs. I took one glance at it and I said, "Skunk." She said, "Oh, no, they aren't, they're Japanese Water Mink." Well, she didn't believe me; and we had a man there who had fought mules with Wild Bill Hickok. He was our prize trapper. I said, "You ask Mr. Traylor." So the next time she saw him she brought him the furs and asked Mr. Traylor what kind of furs they were. He took one look. He said, "Oh, that's a fine natural black skunk. That's the best fur there is. You won't have to worry about moths, they won't bother skunk fur." (Laughter) So of course she was heart broken. So she went right back to the

place where she bought the furs, and they took them back and gave her a nice set of brown ones. In the meantime, my mother briefed me and said, "Now, you keep your trap shut." So here she came back for these brown furs, they were muskrats. (Laughter) But now they have to say what it is. So now, of course, you can't give a skunk away. Very few muskrats.

STERLING: Did Channahon have an inn of any kind?

KNOWLTON: Originally it did, yes. An ordinary house when I was there, but I remember it was right across from Hulbert's store. It may still be standing as far as I know, but during my time there wasn't an inn there.

STERLING: So they didn't do much catering to the canal crowd?

KNOWLTON: You mean passengers on the canal packets?

STERLING: And the crew.

KNOWLTON: Oh, the crew slept on board. Each barge had a cabin on it. Oh yes, they did all their cooking and housekeeping on board. I never saw the passenger packets; they were before my time, but they did have passenger packets. They were towed by horses, because they went faster. You see, they had the right-of-way over the others. The other boats always slacked their line and let the passenger packets go through regardless of whether she was going upstream or down. The passenger packets were light, so they could make good time. They kept the horses at a pretty good clip all the time. They changed the teams

frequently. But see there was what we called a State Barn at every lock. There were two State Barn at Channahon -- one for each lock. The mules would be kept in the State Barns overnight, because generally the canal boats did not run at night. That would have been pretty precarious to run at night. There were so many boats waiting to get locked through that they ran the locks all night. The crews would help lock boats through.

STERLING: There were two State Barns in Channahon?

KNOWLTON: There was one for each lock. Each boat had her own team. When they first started to run the steamboats, they ran into something they hadn't foreseen. The wash of the steamboat would be about as high as this table, I think, or maybe about like this. The two screws, the twin screws, got so much water pushed behind them and she had such a heavy tow (two or three barges beside herself) that there was a lot of slip there. That is, the propellors would push the water back; and if a big wash would come along, it would go right up over the towpath. And it would begin to wash. They riprapped those banks with sandstone for miles and miles. If you look along the banks there where there is banks like by our house, you look along there and you'll find that stone riprap is still in place. That was to keep them from washing. Some places some canals wouldn't allow a mechanical-driven boat at all, only horses and mules. Like for instance the Schuykill Canal in Philadelphia down the Schuykill River. They use horses there. Mules were better

than horses for towing these big heavy canal boats; because in starting the barge out at the lock when she was loaded,it takes a lot of power to get the boat under way. If you had horses, you had to do what they called play-the-line around the cavil -- keep slacking away like this and holding a little more and a little more until you got under way. With mules you didn't have to do that, because the mules knew their job ; and they'd look out for themselves. They would go up into the collars until the line came tight like that. Then they would just stand there leaning into the collars ; and if she gave away, they would take a little step and get her going. They knew their job. They had one rather exciting experience, Mr. Horton told me about ; a boat was bound upstream from Morris. There is quite a long stretch along there where there is a bank, and the towpath runs on top of the bank. They had trouble with muskrats -- they made holes in the bank. As the driver was coming along there,he saw that the water was boiling out down below in a hole in the bank. I remember he whipped and starting yelling. The mules seemed to know it was an emergency in the canal. It would be about a mile or so beneath the lower lock. They came up there full speed ; and the helmsman, of course, was blowing his horn. (Laughter) The locktender, he knew what was coming when he heard that : and he got the lock ready. And they just skidded over the miter sill. The mules were pretty well lathered. They got her in ; and once she was in the locks, she was alright. They just shut the gates behind her. That was the last boat up for quite a while. Oh, she went the whole bank. Oh sure,

washed her right out. That's why they let trappers go through the locks free-of-charge with their skiffs. They paddled up and down the canal setting traps for muskrats, and they were free. They went through free-of-charge. They wanted to trap the muskrats, you see. That's why Holland got into trouble. They thought that they would have a good place in Holland for muskrats and they could sell the fur. Well, it's a fine place for muskrats, alright, but the people didn't buy the fur. And now they have to have government trappers go along to catch the muskrats. They are cutting the dikes. (Laughter) You never know.

STERLING: No, you don't.

KNOWLTON: Well, I guess that's about all.

STERLING: We're getting near the end of the tape. Is there anything else?

KNOWLTON: I can't think of anything else.

STERLING: Any anecdotes?

KNOWLTON: I think we've covered the ground pretty completely.

STERLING: When I send the transcript to you, if there is anything else as you read through it that comes to mind, feel free to pencil it in and elaborate maybe on some of the things you've already said -- if more information comes to mind.

KNOWLTON: I don't remember anything more now.

STERLING: O.K. Thank you very much. It's been very interesting.

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